13 A Short Essay on Conspiracy Theories

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LET'S BEGIN WITH a fairly obvious fact: conspiracies certainly exist.[1] The designation 'conspiracy theory' is often used simply as a means of discrediting certain perfectly rational suggestions about something not being such as presented by official authorities, about there being more to it that meets the eye, about the existence of other hidden motivations and agendas. However, we somehow also feel that there is a difference between (hitherto) unproved suspicions and assumptions about hidden manipulations or agendas and conspiracy theories in the strict sense of the term. Even though it is sometimes hard to tell what exactly this difference would be, and it seems that conspiracy theories simply cease to be considered conspiracy theories when they turn out to be true. This would suggest that we are dealing with a relationship similar to that between the potential and the actual: conspiracy theories are like a reservoir of numerous hypotheses and possibilities, only some of which turn out to be true (and, in so doing, losing the status of being conspiracy theories). Yet, it is clear that this kind of distinction somehow misses the essence of what is at issue with conspiracy theories. For the latter carry in themselves a real, *factual* surplus of theory, which cannot be reduced to, or absorbed into, the difference between theory and actuality. In other words, the question is not simply that of actuality (existence) or non-actuality (non-existence) of some conspiratorial plot, but at least as much that of a specific actuality, reality, of the *theory* itself. The investment, the passion, involved in 'conspiracy theories' is not simply on the side of conspiracies and their revealing, but at least as much on the side of fabricating, forming, producing the theory, assembling or recognising the things that attest to it, interpreting and connecting the clues.

When it comes to conspiracy theories we could thus use the paradigm of Lacan's famous commentary on jealousy: even when our partner is, in fact, cheating on

us, there is still something pathological about our jealousy; there is a surplus that the 'correspondence with facts' cannot fully absorb. We could similarly say that even though some conspiracies really exist, there is still something pathological that pertains to conspiracy theories, some surplus investment that is not reducible to these or those facts. On the other hand, it is important to stress that the 'pathology' at stake here is never simply an individual pathology, but rather registers as a social pathology. As Frederic Jameson beautifully argued in his seminal study of conspiracy films of the 1970s and 1980s, conspiratorial thinking functions as an important means of cognitive mapping in late capitalism – it could be seen as almost the only way left to think about the social as *totality* and about the collective (as opposed to the individual).[2]

Yet, our focus here will be not so much on the possible subversive aesthetic of conspiracy theories as on their epistemological passion and its limit, that is on 'theory'. Within a more generalised feeling of anxiety related to (im)possible presentations of social totality, an almost imperceptible shift of emphasis occurs with conspiracy theories: the emphasis shifts from the reality described by some conspiracy theory ('in truth, the facts are such and such'), to conspiracy, deception, as such. This accounts for the so-called 'paranoid' aspect of conspiracy theories: someone is deliberately manipulating us, doing everything in order to – not simply gain from it – but to *deceive* us, divert us from how things really stand. There are many shades of this, some of them clearly classifiable as serious pathology, with a reference to 'Them' remaining as the only consistent thread, whereas everything else dissolves into a rather messy bulk. A good example is the following testimony of one of the passionate Flat Earthers who gets the chance to explain his convictions in the Netflix documentary *Behind the Curve*:

> And then I found out that it's actually, that biblical cosmology is a geocentric cosmology, then I realised why they are hiding the truth. It's because they don't want anyone to know anything. They want people dumb, blind, deaf to the truth, so they can inject you with their vaccines, and their public schooling and this heliocentric model, which is basically forced sun worship.

It soon becomes all about *Them*, who want us to be become so and so, to do and believe this or that. The agent of conspiracy – even if it remains vague and undefined – is in the foreground, omnipresent and implied in a series of bizarre metonymical shifts concerning the content (vaccinations, public schooling, paganism), the logical connection between which seems clear to the speaker, but much less so to the listener (in our case, it seems to be taken randomly from the evangelist repertoire). In this respect, narratives of conspiracy theorists can often strike us as akin to the logic of

dreams and the connections established by what Freud called the dream-work: they seem perfectly logical and self-evident to the dreamer, but when the latter wakes up, they appear very strange and illogical. And Freud of course was right to insist that there nevertheless *is* a logic involved in the dream-work.

Something else about conspiracy theories is interesting and resembles dreams. For the most part, we can say that they do involve or touch some real, or that, with their incredible narratives, they propose a deformed and displaced articulation of something that could be called, with Lacan, '*le peu du réel*', a little piece of the real. Let's take the example of a quite popular theory according to which the moon landing was staged in a film studio and never really happened. As Jodi Dean has nicely shown,[3] during the period of the Cold War, the entire American space programme had been intrinsically linked to its own television presentation. The rooting and implementation of the TV culture (TV as the new big Other, as the modern focal point, the 'home fire' of every family) had taken place simultaneously and in close relationship to the development of the space programme; from the very outset, the presentation of this programme had been targeting TV audiences, and this included the criteria for choosing and presenting the key protagonists (astronauts) and their families. Could we not infer from this that television and the moon landing were, in fact, materially bound together in a kind of surplus overlapping or fusion, and that it is the real of this fusion that, in a displaced form, propels and surfaces in theories according to which the landing never really happened and was entirely studio staged. This does not mean that the surplus of TV staging involved in NASA's moon expedition 'explains' this particular conspiracy theory or that the latter can be reduced to it. There are many more things at stake, but we can say that the investment in its TV staging, and in the wholesome presentation-production of the expedition, functions as the 'little piece of the real' – probably not the only one – at work in this conspiracy theory.

In any case, conspiracy theories are a complex and interesting phenomenon which cannot simply be dismissed with disdain. Even less so in these times when some of the most bizarre of conspiracy theories seem to be forcefully entering the public space, the mainstream, even official politics. (The most striking example here is probably the link between QAnon and the politics and person of Donald Trump; according to some sources more than thirty-five candidates for congress adhered to this conspiracy theory, which we'll look into in more detail later.) And this is an important shift in the social status of conspiracy theories compared to their marginal and positionally subversive status in the 1970s and 1980s. There are many reasons for this march of conspiracy theories from the social margins to its centre, and they are situated on many different levels.

For example, one often points the finger at what appears in our contemporary Western society as a kind of vulgar and generalised postmodern realisation

of 'Nietzscheism': the decline of objective truth as value and as epistemological category. In this vein, one likes to attribute the fact that 'it is no longer possible to distinguish truth from fiction' to the influence of modern and postmodern theory, to the deconstruction of the notion of the original, to the undermining of different authorities and to the general promotion of relativism and nominalism . . . But, in this enthusiasm of rediscovered realism, one also tends to forget a very realistic fact that it is often quite *objectively* hard to distinguish between the two. Counterfeits and 'fakes' are in fact getting better and better; technology has produced some astonishing and disturbing effects in this regard. Our social relations in late capitalism are excessively fictionised, in order for the *reality* of capital to be able to follow its course. And, this is not a question of theory, but of real material configurations that include and necessitate such fictions.[4] 'Postmodern' questioning and undermining of the original has long since moved to reality itself, and is no longer simply 'a question of perspective', of a theory or an 'ideology' of the multitude of different perspectives.

We can, of course, agree that the supposedly democratic relativising and levelling of different claims, with scientific claims appearing as just one of many 'language games', appear today as a considerable social problem, as does the dissolution of the 'public' as a general or common platform that has long played the role of the shared big Other and its replacement with particularised and privatised truths. Yet, even if we accept this rather simplistic thesis according to which it was 'relativism' that paved the way for conspiracy theories to enter the mainstream, this by no means implies that conspiracy theories swear by relativism. On the contrary, they take the category of truth very seriously. They believe that there is Truth; they are just convinced that this truth is different or other than the official one. The paradigmatic idea of conspiracy theories is not that 'there are many truths', but that *there exists another Truth*.

Critical Theory and Conspiracy Theories

In this precise point conspiracy theories do not so much resemble a 'Nietzschean relativism' as they come close to a certain tradition of critical theory, of 'critique' – as Bruno Latour waggishly observed some time ago:

> Let me be mean for a second. What's the real difference between conspiracists and a popularized, that is a teachable version of social critique inspired by a too quick reading of, let's say, a sociologist as eminent as Pierre Bourdieu (to be polite I will stick with the French field commanders)? In both cases, you have to learn to become suspicious of everything people say because of course we all know that

> they live in the thralls of a complete *illusion* of their real motives. Then, after disbelief has struck and an explanation is requested for what is really going on, in both cases again it is the same appeal to powerful agents hidden in the dark acting always consistently, continuously, relentlessly. Of course, we in the academy like to use more elevated causes – society, discourse, knowledge-slash-power, fields of forces, empires, capitalism – while conspiracists like to portray a miserable bunch of greedy people with dark intents, but I find something troublingly similar in the structure of the explanation, in the first movement of disbelief and, then, in the wheeling of causal explanations coming out of the deep dark below. [. . .] Of course conspiracy theories are an absurd deformation of our own arguments, but, like weapons smuggled through a fuzzy border to the wrong party, these are our weapons nonetheless. In spite of all the deformations, it is easy to recognize, still burnt in the steel, our trademark: *Made in Criticalland*.[5]

Latour concludes from there that the pertinence of critical theory (which he has been himself part of) may be running out, and critique should be set on different foundations, should change profoundly. In other words, his essay is also a programmatic text that accompanies his own philosophical turn to ontological realism or 'practical metaphysics', as he calls it in his book *Reassembling the Social*. This is, of course, not the place to engage in the discussion of Latour's work and his version of metaphysics. What is interesting for our present purposes is perhaps the following, which makes the landscape we are dealing with rather more complex: Latour's turning away from critical theory moves, in fact, in the direction of radical *relativism*, of affirming the existence of multiple contradictory worlds and claims, which are all of the same ontological value. Put in the simplest form, the fundamental Latourian thesis is this: there exists no basic structure of reality, but, instead, a plurality of realities ('words') which shall all be considered of equal ontological weight, all considered as 'objective'. There are no subjective facts. Similarly, we need to take seriously (and literally) the claims of different actors about what motivates them, instead of always looking for another, truer explanation.

So, paradoxically, Latour uses the comparison of critical theory with conspiracy theories to argue a point which, in its consequences, sounds like a universalisation of conspiracy theories: to every actor her conspiracy theory. What he deems problematic in the logical modality of conspiracy theories (as well as in critique or critical theory) is only the fact that these theories believe in truth at all and in a possibly different reality (different from what seems to be the case), in the existence of a basic structure of reality, in the possibility for things – including what we get as 'facts' – *to be explained* (in another way) *by any interpretation, narrative or theory*. This then is the point that critical theory shares with conspiracy theories: they both believe in

the existence of another, different truth. Contrary to this, Latour's metaphysics is radically opposed to the very modality of interpretation and of sceptical attitude. We could say that, in Latour's metaphysics, conspiracy theories are one of the multiple worlds (or several of them) which enter as such into interaction with other worlds. They are not problematic because of their views or what they hold to be true, but merely because of their 'critical' epistemological point of departure, which is, in fact, 'dogmatic' (there exists a basic structure of reality which we can establish). One should also not forget that the target of Latour's essay is, in fact, 'critique' and not conspiracy theories, the latter appearing as a means of discrediting the epistemological presuppositions (and ontological consequences) of critique on account of its proximity to conspiracy theories. Yet, this is above all a rhetorical manoeuvre which, in its implications, nevertheless seems to be much too simplistic.

What is attributed to 'critique' in this perspective is paradoxically what Nietzsche attributed to classical metaphysics: the belief in the existence of two worlds, one apparent and one true, whereby the 'critique' involves interpreting the world according to the automatic presupposition that appearances are always deceiving and that there exists another, truer explanation. Sceptical attitude and hermeneutical passion, 'passion for interpretation', are in this sense also and obviously quite different from the claim that 'there are no facts, only interpretations', since interpretation is here driven by the conviction that it operates in the service of the truth (in the singular), that it leads somewhere and that it matters where it leads. Latour's main target is thus the conviction that there even exists such a thing as a right explanation. In this sense, he is indeed much closer to 'postmodernism' than to critical theory. In his endeavour to undermine the perspective of 'critique', relativism is not Latour's enemy, but his ally. This is useful to keep in mind when reading the following observation, with which we could otherwise fully agree.

> In which case the danger would no longer be coming from an excessive confidence in ideological arguments posturing as matters of fact – as we have learned to combat so efficiently in the past – but from an excessive *distrust* of good matters of fact disguised as bad ideological biases! While we spent years trying to detect the real prejudices hidden behind the appearance of objective statements, do we now have to reveal the real objective and incontrovertible facts hidden behind the *illusion* of prejudices? And yet entire Ph.D. programs are still running to make sure that good American kids are learning the hard way that facts are made up, that there is no such thing as natural, unmediated, unbiased access to truth, that we are always prisoners of language, that we always speak from a particular standpoint, and so on, while dangerous extremists are using the very same argument of social construction to destroy hard-won evidence that could save our lives.[6]

The efficiency of this argument resides in explicating the turn which we probably all experience as very true: on many levels of our society, we are witnessing lately a massive discrediting of different facts (for example: of scientific evidence of climate change, of the existence of the COVID-19 virus, of the safety of the vaccines, of the credibility of public media . . .), so that many different actors, starting with conspiracy theorists, no longer trust these facts and see them as the embodiment of prejudices, as ideological fog, illusion, manipulation. In the present context of the COVID crisis, we can, in fact, also see how a considerable part of the so-called 'critical public' (and theory) at least partly overlaps in their views with conspiracists. However, when greeting Latour's diagnosis with approval, we must not forget that his point and 'solution' is not at all a return to and reaffirmation of 'true facts' (for example, scientific facts) and their defence against the 'dangerous extremists' he evokes, but, on the contrary, a radicalisation of relativism, with the difference between illusion and reality becoming utterly irrelevant. In other words, Latour does not suggest that we should start revealing the objective and provable facts which are now hidden behind the *illusion* of prejudices (hidden in their *appearing* as prejudices), but that we should completely abandon the very (epistemological and ontological) apparatus of *distinguishing* between the two. Everything that exists is an objective and relevant fact. Facts are not the opposite of illusion or fiction – the latter also constitute facts.

We propose to take Latour's suggestion from the above quotation more literally, as a useful identification of the change that has occurred in the relationship between illusion and actuality. But we are not willing simply to give up on the epistemological value of this distinction between illusion and actuality which, moreover, cannot be reduced to the distinction between a true and an apparent world. And, I hope it is needless to stress that we find within the tradition of critical theory powerful currents and works that strongly resist this oversimplified distinction between two worlds (true and apparent), which can be said to actually miss the essence of 'critique'. Of course, this essay cannot be an occasion for analysing critical theory and its relationship to Latour's theory, which we are leaving behind at this point. We'll simply take the suggestion about a conspicuous similarity of the 'first reflex' (scepticism) that conspiracy theories share with critical theory as a starting point for exposing some of their important differences. This will then hopefully help us shed some new light on several fundamental structural traits of conspiracy theories.

The Subject Supposed to Deceive (Us)

Let's start with the automatism of doubting everything that presents itself as official fact, that is to say with the principled and pronounced sceptical attitude. For example, the key point of the ideology critique is that it is not enough to define ideology

as 'false consciousness' and that one needs to carefully examine the ways in which this 'falseness' materially exists in reality and in our everyday practices. Scepticism takes place primarily with respect to symbolic authorities, with respect to 'power', to the supposed self-evidence of general consensus or simply with respect to everything 'official'. However, while critical theory examines the means and ways in which, for instance, the 'manufacturing of consent' takes place, and hence focuses its critical lenses upon consensus reality, upon the way in which certain facts are being produced as facts, upon their inner structuring and dialectics, upon the workings of ideology (mechanisms that usually operate right before our eyes, on the surface, and are inseparably bound up with a given reality), a conspiracy theory immediately jumps to what is behind, to hidden depths, to another reality. It never really deals with (critical) analysis of facts and of reality in their inner structure, but simply sweeps them away as false examined seriously – and *thus irrelevant*. The basic assumption of any critical theory worthy of its name, on the other hand, is that precisely as 'false' these facts are extremely relevant for the analysis and have to be taken and examined seriously. This basic move from the problematic character of facts and reality to their resulting *irrelevance* represents indeed – in a quite literal way – the first step towards the 'loss of reality' characteristic of conspiracy theories. The interrogation of why and how illusions appear and structure our reality gets immediately solved/dismissed by evoking the Agent of alleged conspiracy, which 'explains' everything at once. It seems that this Agent of conspiracy, with all the often very complex machinations it is purportedly orchestrating, has only one fundamental agenda: to deceive us, to keep us in error – not so much to deceive us *about* this or that, but to deceive us, full stop. It is usually also not very clear why It does this: deception as such seems to be the main and sufficient motive. Of course, we often get hear about 'Their' interests, 'Their' profiting from it . . . But these interests and profit habitually remain rather unclear and uncertain, especially if we take into consideration all the incredible efforts and expenses put into deception. Take, for example, the efforts (and costs) that would have been needed for 'Them' to sustain the illusion of a round earth rotating around the sun, if the earth were, in fact, flat: any possible interest, profit or gain dissolve in the face of what appears as a much stronger and primordial Interest or Will: to deceive us.

Conspiracy theorists thus have a very interesting and intricate relationship to what Lacan calls the agency of the big Other. On the one hand, they are convinced that a big Other very much exists (they believe in in the existence of an agency which is in itself consistent, operates purposefully, pulls all the strings and coordinates them). Yet they also believe that this agency is fundamentally and deliberately deceiving. We could say that they believe in the existence of Descartes's hypothetical evil genius or demon from the beginning of the *Meditations*, who deliberately deceives

us about everything. Could we conclude from this that we are basically dealing with a desperate attempt to preserve the agency of the big Other in the times of its disintegration into a generalised relativism, an attempt that can succeed only at the price of moving the big Other to the zone of malevolence and evil? The consistency of the big Other (its not being 'barred') can no longer manifest itself in anything else but in the Other successfully deceiving us. A consistent big Other can only be a big Deceiver (a big Fraud or Cheat), an evil Other. A consistent God can only be an evil God; nothing else adds up. Yet better an evil God than no God.

Yet to explain this by the 'need for a big Other' does not seem to exhaust the phenomenon and the meaning of the assumption shared by all conspiracy theories, namely that there exists a Subject or Agent who is deliberately deceiving us. The libidinal emphasis is not merely on the existence of the Other (better an evil Other than no Other at all); the deceptiveness and evilness of the Other rather seem to be *constitutive* of His existence, not just the price of this existence. The presupposition is thus somewhat stronger and could be formulated in this way: the big Other can only be deceiving/malevolent, or else It does not exist. Deceitfulness and malevolence seem to vouch from within for the consistency of the big Other – the consistency that remains utterly untouched in the midst of all the allegedly 'radical critique' and scepticism at work in conspiracy theories. The Other *is* almighty. We can certainly detect here an inner limit of the critical attitude and scepticism on which conspiracy theorists like to pride themselves. They are not at all too critical or too sceptical, but, rather, not critical and sceptical enough. They don't believe anyone or anything, they are sceptical of every 'fact', yet they believe in a big Other deceiving us consistently, systematically and unfailingly at all times. Related to this is another feedback loop of conspiracy theories, their blind spot that appears as tautology and as their inner limit. If a conspiracy theory turns out to be 'true' and thus becomes the official version of events, this throws a dubious light on the figure of the almighty Deceiver, who thus turns out to be less mighty and consistent than we have claimed. Conspiracy theorists often invest great efforts in proving their theories. Yet, if they succeed with these proofs, this puts their original presuppositions in a bad light: was this then really a Conspiracy, or just an (unsuccessful) attempt to cover up certain facts? The condition of existence of a Conspiracy is, in a way, that it can never really become the official version of events. If this happens, it itself provides grounds for suspicion: maybe this is a new, even more perfidious tactic (a double game), involving a deeper level of Conspiracy . . .

Let's imagine for a moment that an objective investigation would, in fact, confirm that the moon landing was staged and filmed in a studio. Would the supporters of this theory be triumphantly opening campaigns, celebrating that their theory prevailed and that they have been *right* all along? I think it is safe to say that this would

not be the case. This is because what they want to be 'right' about in this whole matter is not the question whether or not man has indeed stepped on the moon, but the claim that 'They' are systematically deceiving us about that. The moment conspiracy theories turn out to be 'right,' they also turn out to be wrong, since the (successful) deception is over. Conspiracy theories are right about the authorities systematically and deliberately deceiving us only insofar as the deception fully works. At least partly related to this is yet another distinctive feature of conspiracy theorists: that they can easily let go of one conspiracy theory and embrace another, that they tend to rotate between different conspiracy theories (often believing in several at once). The emphasis is not so much on the content, as it is on the modality of conspiracy, that is on the fact that there is a conspiracy going on. What follows from there is that, in their insisting on *another truth*, the emphasis is not so much on truth as it is on 'another', other, different. More exactly, otherness constitutes here an inherent moment of truth; truth is always other (than official) –hence its plasticity and slipperiness.

Conspiracy does not exist only on 'Their' side, on the side of the deceiving Other(s); there is also something conspiratorial that exists on the side of conspiracy theorists. It is not only that Conspiracies are supposedly planned and carried out in secret locations, where the evil and powerful meet and rule the world; conspiracy theorists also keep to secret, dark locations, away from the sunlight (for example, in the depths of the Internet), and there is certainly something like a conspiratorial 'complicity' that exists between them: a certain tie, an initiation into and sharing of some surplus knowledge – yet a surplus knowledge that exists only so long as there exists a Conspiracy on the other side.

Conspiracy theorists are usually caught in a mirroring, imaginary relationship with the (deceitful) Other. On the one hand, there is 'us' (who know what is *really* going on), and on the other side are 'Them' (who, of course, also know what is going on, since they are the agents of all the machinations). In between are the naive, blinded masses of people who, with their belief in the 'official version' of events propagated by 'Them', actually testify to the existence and the colossal dimension of conspiracy. What most people believe does not appear in this configuration as a 'reality check' that could make the conspiracy theorists pause and perhaps doubt their beliefs, but, on the contrary, appear as proving the rightfulness of the conspiracy theorists' beliefs.

We mentioned above the *surplus knowledge*, which also constitutes an important element of this configuration. 'Our' surplus knowledge, our knowledge about how things really stand, functions as a direct guarantee (testimony about) the consistency of the big Other, of the big Deceiver. Or, perhaps more precisely: our surplus knowledge is in a way a worldly appearing, embodiment of this consistency, its 'extimate'

core. The key to the consistency of the big Other dwells outside Him; it dwells in us, who are able to see it, and to take care of it with our theories and interpretative efforts.

The Delirium of Interpretation

Related to the preceding is a specific 'delirium of interpretation' at work in conspiracy theories. Paradoxically, the interpretation is fuelled here by knowledge of the solution, of the end result: the basic question is how to read and interpret what takes place or appears in this world in such a way that we'll get a result given in advance (existing in the basic claims of a conspiracy theory), and which differs from the 'obvious' explanation. In this respect, conspiracy theories resemble what is known from the history of science (particularly astronomy) as 'saving the phenomena' – with the 'choice' between the Ptolemaic system and the heliocentric model as the most famous example. The Ptolemaic system, based on the presupposition of the earth as the centre of the universe, around which other planets circulate, started to be confronted at some point with a growing mass of empirical telescopic observations of planetary movements which did not appear as circular. In response to this, the Ptolemaic astronomers developed a very complex theory of epicycles and eccentric orbits, which would be able to reconcile the observation results with the basic presumption (that the earth stands motionless and the planets circulate around it), and hence to account for the discordant 'facts'. The heliocentric hypothesis was able to account for these facts better and in a much simpler way, but it required a radical change of the most fundamental cosmological presuppositions. Conspiracy theories often strike us as similar to this practice of 'saving the phenomena': they introduce additional hypotheses and much more complicated explanations of the same events in order to justify their version of reality, which they believe in and take as their starting point.

In addition to the figure of the big Other as the big Deceiver, there also exists in some conspiracy theories a more specific instance of a specular, mirror-image big Other: a big Other that is on 'our' side, a good big Other, the carrier of Truth and Light. This is a feature that brings some of these conspiracy theories close to religion. The good, truthful Other differs considerably, in its inherent structuring, from the big Other of the consistently deceptive narrative. It functions as a sort of Oracle, as a Grey Eminence of enigmatic messages, which as such do not (yet) form a consistent narrative. It falls to us to construct this Narrative. This is the figure of the good big Other that we encounter, for example, in what is probably the most popular political conspiracy theory today: QAnon.

On 28 October 2017, 'Q' emerged from the primordial swamp of the Internet on the message board 4chan, and quickly established his legend as a government

insider with top security clearance (the co-called Q-clearance) who knew the truth about the secret struggle for power between Trump and the 'deep state'. Since then, he has posted more than 4,000 times, and moved from posting on 4chan to posting on 8chan in November 2017, went silent for several months after 8chan shut down in August 2019, and eventually re-emerged on a new website established by 8chan's owner, 8kun.[7] Though posting anonymously, Q uses a 'trip code' that allows followers to distinguish his posts from those of other anonymous users (known as 'Anons'). Q's posts are cryptic and elliptical, enigmatic. They often consist of a long string of leading questions designed to guide readers towards discovering the 'truth' for themselves through 'research'. The beauty of this procedure is, of course, that when a concrete prediction fails to come to pass (which happens fairly often), the true believers quickly adapt their narratives to account for inconsistencies. For close followers of QAnon, the posts (or 'drops') contain 'crumbs' of intelligence that they 'bake' into 'proofs'. For 'bakers', QAnon is both a fun hobby and a deadly serious calling. (Here we can see again how 'bakers' resemble in their functioning what Freud called the dream-work, composing a seemingly 'consistent' narrative out of bits and 'crumbs' of realty.)

This particular theory, for which many hold that it is more than a conspiracy theory (a worldview akin to a new religion or a new political movement), thus involves a hierarchical structure, at the centre of which stands 'our', good, big Other, fighting from the underground against the evil big Other who rules the world and keeps us prisoners of all kinds of illusions. The iconography of 'resistance movement' that stands at the heart of one of the most reactionary conspiracy theories is in itself very interesting in instructive. The movie *The Matrix* presents us with a kind of 'leftist' version of a very similar configuration: a smaller group of 'freedom fighters' is resisting the big Other who keeps the world caught in a gigantic illusion of life and reality; from the underground the freedom fighters try to break this spell and fight for emancipation. The key figure for the success of this fight is called – the Oracle.

In QAnon Q functions indeed as an oracle: thanks to his supposed access to the highest secrets he is an embodiment of the absolute surplus knowledge, the 'crumbs' of which fall among his followers who then 'bake' stories out of them – they bake and compose these narratives based on their own research and interpretation. It probably goes without saying that the passion involved in this research is in itself a considerable satisfaction and hence reward for the bakers' efforts. In some ways, we are dealing with a challenge and a passion similar to that involved in a whole range of games, except that here the lines between game and reality are obliterated from the very outset and the stakes so much the higher. For to be good in this game means to know more about the (true) reality of the world. Besides 'bakers'

and the most fervent followers, there is also a big crowd of 'ordinary' believers who simply take these narratives, this *work* (of conspiracy theory) *in progress*, seriously. But also with these 'ordinary people,' we can detect an unmistakable passion for interpretation, a considerable amount of self-initiative in researching and establishing all kinds of connections, which can also vary considerably – within the general narrative framework of QAnon – depending on the local environment and personal obsessions.

Opposite the big Other of conspiracy, the big Deceiver thus stands in this conspiracy theory as an oracular big Other; the latter does not tell us the Truth (except, of course, in its vaguest contours), but it helps *us* guess it, dig it out or 'reconstruct' it, fully spell it out by ourselves – and, hence, subjectivise it, take it for our own and, if needed, defend it passionately. We could recall here Lacan's remarks concerning the function and functioning of enigma. Taking as an example the enigma that the Sphinx posed to Oedipus who, by answering it, became the king (and, hence, fixed his destiny), Lacan points out that Oedipus could have answered differently to the Sphinx's question ('What it is that first goes on four feet, then two and finally on three?'). But, in this case, he wouldn't be the Oedipus we know:

> I think you can see what the function of the enigma means – it's a half-said [*mi-dire*], just as the Chimera appears as a half-body, with the risk of disappearing altogether once the solution has been found.
>
> If I insisted at length on the difference in level between the utterance [*énonciation*] and the statement [*énoncé*], it was so that the function of the enigma would make sense. An enigma is most likely that, an utterance, I charge you with the task of making it into a statement. Sort that out as best you can – as Oedipus did – and you will bear the consequences. That is what is at issue in an enigma.[8]

When solving this kind of enigma, we sort of stake ourselves as a wager; we get involved in the reality that we are deciphering; we become a guarantee of this reality. This explains well the investment, the zeal, one can observe in conspiracy theorists – including those conspiracy theories that do not involve any oracular figure and where the enigma consists in putting together different pieces of the world in such a way that they would accord with the utterance describing an alternative reality (a flat earth, for example).

In this sense, the truth that we establish based on our own 'research' and deciphering of enigmatic, oracular messages is, of course, much more strongly subjectivised; for in a way, it *is* the truth of the subject. One cannot have a neutral, indifferent stance towards it. It is also much more militantly efficient than a truth simply told or revealed. This is because we spend hours, days, years looking for and establishing

certain connections, moving our 'knowledge' from the register of supposedly 'better knowledge' to the register of a considerable 'occupation' of this knowledge.We are personally invested in it, since it binds knowledge to our very Being, a being which we are ready to pawn for this knowledge (for deciphering the truth). The subjective investment has, of course, many practical and – in the case of QAnon, politically objective – consequences.

At issue is also an extremely 'productive' type of link between knowledge and belief, which looks like a caricature of what psychoanalysis conceptualised with the notion of *transference*. The blind faith in some of the basic claims (and/or their heralds) is the condition or trigger of the mass production of (surplus) knowledge. In other words, involved here is not just a blind faith in a certain conspiracy's dogmas or truths, but also the fact the *we* personally (and 'autonomously') dig out and reconstruct the truth through our own labour and research. This is based on an infallible faith which already contains the end result. The research and the knowledge based on it are, in this sense, like pieces of a puzzle the design of which already exists in its contours, although it also remains 'plastic' and ambiguous in many ways. Yet, this description is still too simple. For we need to pay attention to an important spin, a circular redoubling that we can see in many testimonies of fervent followers of different conspiracy theories. Many emphasise that the first step is not belief, but scepticism. As a rule, it all starts with disbelief: people hear about some conspiracy theory and are very sceptical about it, frequently finding it absurd. Yet something about it (sometimes its very 'absurdity') attracts their attention enough for them to start looking into it some more, to do some research and to – often with fascinated disbelief – plunge into the reading of related literature and websites, which sends them straight down the 'rabbit hole'. In this process, scepticism and disbelief are gradually replaced by fervent Belief in the knowledge thus obtained, the Belief that is all the more absolute because they have themselves come to this knowledge, in spite of their original scepticism and based on their own research and establishing the right connections. The scepticism that we find at the origin of practically all conspiracy theories is the inherent condition of true faith. Yet this scepticism is not only scepticism regarding the official versions of events and official authorities, but also scepticism concerning the conspiracy theory itself; it constitutes the inner condition and the first step towards absolute belief in it.

In this respect, conspiracy theories come indeed very close to the configuration of the unconscious knowledge, 'knowledge that doesn't know itself', that Lacan also points out in relation to enigmas. It is as if, from the very outset, its supporters *knew without knowing*, without knowing that they know. What attracts them immediately in a conspiracy theory, in spite of their scepticism, is ultimately that, in a way ('unconsciously'), they already know. Or, as Peter Klepec formulated this following

a different path: 'We could say that the firmness of their conviction or belief springs from what is unconscious in the psychoanalytic sense of the term.'[9]

The beliefs the rightness of which we establish and vouch for ourselves, personally, and that are fortified on the level of the unconscious, are special kind of beliefs, and the subjective investment is involved here in a particularly strong way, making of doubt the main fuel of certainty. The (more or less paranoid, albeit not always unjustified) attitude, according to which we can believe no one and nothing and can rely only on ourselves, thus starts to function in a dialectical turn as the inner condition and pillar of the blind and unshakable belief in most bizarre, incredible things. We can indeed wonder how people who believe no respectful media, no authorities, no scientific proofs – people who, in sum, meet all the segments of the 'official' explanation of reality with utter scepticism – can immediately believe that aliens are kidnapping humans, that the earth is flat, that George Soros runs a child trafficking network, that the COVID-19 virus does not exist . . . The list is very, very long and very picturesque. The more bizarre the idea, the more credible it seems; the actual credibility of a theory is inversely proportional to its spontaneously perceived credibility. This is not so surprising, since spontaneity is, in this perspective, nothing but prejudice systematically produced by the media. What we *spontaneously*, automatically believe is thus most certainly wrong or, as Alhusser would put it, it is a hallmark of ideology. Yet what is very different from any kind of Athusserian 'critical' perspective is this additional move that we find in conspiracy theories, the move in which the element of bizarreness and incredibility becomes itself an immediate epistemological criterion of truth, proof of the theories' claims.

The Enjoy-meant

We have so far kept aside the fact that conspiracy theories also carry in themselves a strong libidinal component, the problem of enjoyment. In conclusion, we'll now try to sketch out briefly the logic of this component. An element of excessive enjoyment often appears in conspiracy theories as their instigator or bait: something that first catches our attention. A typical example of this kind of excessive, fantasmatic bait is QAnon's hijacking of the #SaveTheChildren hashtag. It is also in many other aspects that QAnon's manipulative big Other swarms with surplus enjoyment. QAnon's supporters believe, among other things, that a cabal of Satan-worshipping Democrats, Hollywood celebrities and billionaires[10] runs the world while engaging in pedophilia, human trafficking and the harvesting of a supposedly life-extending chemical from the blood of abused children. Besides this last motive, which is a traditional anti-Semitic commonplace, anti-Semitism is at work already in the initial claim. The idea of the all-powerful, world-ruling cabal comes straight out of

the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, a fake document purporting to expose a Jewish plot to control the world that was used throughout the twentieth century to justify anti-Semitism.

The Other as the place onto which get projected different fantasies and excessive and bizarre enjoyment, is something that we find in all conspiracy theories. Yet its presence is not equally strong in all of them, and does not 'interpellate' all the followers in the same way. We could say that, although conspiracy theories always incorporate a *structural place* of the Other who indulges in some sort of 'impossible enjoyment', who is stealing our enjoyment or enjoying at our expense, who, with his enjoyment, embodies the quintessential Foreignness with respect to us – this is nevertheless not what primarily defines conspiracy theories. The notions about the stealing of enjoyment (by the Other), as well as about the Foreign character of this enjoyment, constitute a somewhat more general category or fantasmatic structure,[11] which can be found, for example, in all racisms and, of course, at the very core of anti-Semitism. So, maybe we should reverse the perspective here and say: the significance and the presence of the enjoying Other in a conspiracy theory is proportional to the role and significance held in it by racism, anti-Semitism, feelings of being threatened by Foreigners . . .

In theories such as, for example, the flat earth theory or theories about the moon landing being staged, this component is present to a much lesser degree or left up to the individual psychological traits of the followers. Yet, this does not mean that the layer of enjoyment is absent; it means that we need to look for it elsewhere. Indeed, there is something that we can find in *all* conspiracy theories and that is inherently connected with enjoyment – connected with what Lacan called *joui-sens* (a word play with *jouissance* [enjoyment]), 'enjoy-meant' or the enjoyment of meaning. Many already have noted that conspiracy theories are kinds of hermeneutic machines – we could call them 'Meaning games', paraphrasing the title 'Hunger games'. One of the fundamental rules of these 'games' is that everything that happens has a meaning, that there are no coincidences, no contingencies. Everything that happens is up for interpretation that will lead to its true Meaning. With Lacan, we come to a perhaps surprising connection between this generating of meaning and enjoyment. *Qui n'en a le sens avec le joui?* Says Lacan in one of his famous word plays – 'who doesn't "get" the meaning [*sens*] along with pleasure [*joui*]?'[12] The phrase is difficult to translate, but we could also say: who doesn't make (produce, generate) meaning with pleasure, who doesn't enjoy making sense/meaning? At issue is not only enjoyment in meaning, enjoyment taken in producing/recognising meaning, but also the act of producing, generating, 'making' sense *of* enjoyment, making it 'mean' something.

One of the basic driving forces of conspiracy theorists could be identified precisely as making sense of enjoyment, *jouissance* – and this insofar as *jouissance* is

meaningless, serves no purpose, doesn't make any sense and strikes us as superfluous (as something that need not be there). To repeat: the vector here *simultaneously* points in both directions, from enjoyment to meaning (interpretation as making sense and use of something that appears as meaningless, useless) and from meaning to enjoyment (enjoyment in producing meaning).

From this perspective, the conspiratorial presumption that 'there are no coincidences' could be seen as another way of saying that 'there is no enjoyment', that is to say, as signalling the repression of enjoyment in its status of being a meaningless, useless X. As far as conspiracy theorists are concerned, there are no coincidences, no contingencies, therefore no enjoyment – not on their side, at least. Every shoot of enjoyment (of which there is certainly no lack) gets immediately processed into meaning, drives the hermeneutic machine, and overtakes the quest for truth as the driving force of interpretation. In this respect, conspiracy theories are like a manufacturing industry of enjoyment, a manufacturing industry in the sense of 'processing products from raw materials'. It is a manufacturing industry of enjoyment that relies heavily on (the work of) the unconscious. Yet the enjoyment thus processed into meaning doesn't stop coming back; it keeps returning with the enjoyment in 'making sense', the enjoyment in meaning. And this calls for more (conspiracy) theory. In this way, conspiracy theories are kept closed within their own vicious circle on account of this circle never being able actually to close – for what keeps pouring into it, together with the welcome familiarity of meaning, is a strange, heterogeneous element of enjoyment.

Notes

1. This chapter is a result of the research programme P6-0014 'Conditions and Problems of Contemporary Philosophy', the research project J6-9392 'The Problem of Objectivity and Fiction in Contemporary Philosophy' and the bilateral cooperation project BI-US/18-20-026 'Objectivity beyond the Subject-Object Dichotomy: Fiction, Truth, Affect' between the Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Science and Arts and the University of New Mexico, which are funded by the Slovenian Research Agency.
2. Frederic Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aestethics* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press and British Film Institute, 1992).
3. Jodi Dean, *Aliens in America. Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).
4. See Slavoj Žižek's paper in this volume.
5. Bruno Latour, 'Why has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 30, no. 2 (Winter 2004), pp. 228–30.

6. Latour, 'Why has Critique Run Out of Steam?', p. 227.
7. Julia Carrie Wong, 'QAnon explained: the antisemitic conspiracy theory gaining traction around the world' (2020) available at <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/aug/25/qanon-conspiracy-theory-explained-trump-what-is> accessed 15 February 2021.
8. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Russell Grigg (London and New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), pp. 36–7.
9. Peter Klepec, 'Kaj spregleda "teorija zarote"?', *Časopis za kritiko znanosti*, no. 266 (2016), p. 68.
10. Here are some of the names that keep coming up: Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, George Soros, Bill Gates, Tom Hanks, Oprah Winfrey, Chrissy Teigen and Pope Francis.
11. For a more detailed account of this and of some related questions see Mladen Dolar, 'The Subject Supposed to Enjoy', in Alain Grosrichard, *The Sultan's Court: European Fantasies of the East* (London and New York: Verso, 1998), pp. ix–xxvii.
12. Jacques Lacan, *Television. A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*, trans. Joan Copjec (London and New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), p. 16.